

Union Passenger Station Concourse
1713 Pacific Avenue
Tacoma
Pierce County
Washington

HABS-WA-159

HABS
LOCAL
27-TACO,
6 C-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Western Region National Park Service
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

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27-TACO

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UNION PASSENGER STATION CONCOURSE

Location: 1713 Pacific Avenue
Tacoma, Pierce County, Washington

Date of Construction: 1911

Present Owner: Burlington Northern, Inc.
176 East Fifth Street, Room 1018
St. Paul, MN 55101

Present Use: Waiting Room and Storage Area; to be demolished in
1984

Significance: The construction of a 116 foot long concourse which
spanned the system of tracks and platforms was part of
the original design of the Union Passenger Station in
Tacoma. The entire complex, which was completed in
1911, was designed by the St. Paul firm of Reed and
Stem, who were renowned architects in the field of
railway station design. Both architecturally and
historically, the concourse is a significant element
of the total terminal design. It served as an auxili-
ary waiting room, an observation deck, and a vital
link in the movement of passengers between the grand
domed ticket area at street level and the track plat-
forms below. In concert with other design features of
the station, the concourse contributed to its reputa-
tion for efficiency.

Historians: Florence K. Lentz (1982)
Lisa Soderberg (1983)

From 1909 to 1911, the Northern Pacific Railroad constructed a handsome new passenger station in the terminal city of Tacoma, Washington. Even before its opening, the Northern Pacific made arrangements to use the facility jointly with the Great Northern and the Oregon-Washington Railroad and Navigation Company. The St. Paul firm of Reed and Stem, Minnesota's nationally renowned architects in the field of railway station design, were commissioned for the Tacoma depot project. Reed and Stem are perhaps most often remembered today as collaborators with the firm of Warren and Wetmore on the design of the still extant Grand Central Station in New York, but monumental examples of their work could once be found throughout the country. In Tacoma, a Mr. John Lloyd served Reed and Stem as on-site superintendent during the intensive two-year construction project that involved as many as 200 men at one time. The Hurley-Mason Company served as contractors.

The completion of the domed, classical Beaux-Arts style terminal was an event of great symbolism to the people of Tacoma. As the grand opening festivities of May 1, 1911, drew near, the Tacoma Daily Ledger wrote:

One week from this morning the first trains of three great transcontinental railroad systems will draw up beneath the sheds that reach for hundreds of feet on either side of the station, and Tacomans leaving the city or the friends of Tacomans coming to the city--any persons and all persons traveling in or out of Tacoma behind steam power--will begin using the largest, the most modern and in all ways the most beautiful and the best equipped passenger station in the Pacific Northwest.¹

Contemporary architectural journals agreed that the new Union Station provided Tacoma with its requisite "beautiful approach" in terms of the popular "City Beautiful" movement.² The depot's architectural features--the copper clad steel dome rising 100 feet above street level, its dark red brick facing with Bedford sandstone trim, its massive formal arched entrance and its spacious coffered waiting room--were repeatedly praised. No less frequently

cited were the station's efficiency of plan, its economy of operation and its modern amenities, including pneumatic tubes for the movement of baggage checks and a vacuum system for the cleaning of trains. Each article located in this literature search made particular mention of the concourse and its relationship to the design of the terminal as a whole. The Railroad Age Gazette, in fact, opened its review and discussion of the new station with an analysis of the concourse as a major design solution:

The new passenger station of the Northern Pacific at Tacoma, Wash., now under contract, will be at a point on Pacific Avenue, where the tracks lie 27 ft. below the street level. This peculiarity forms one of the dominant features of the architectural problem.

The outgoing passengers enter the station from Pacific Avenue, purchase their tickets and check baggage, then descend one flight of stairs to the concourse. The concourse extends across the tracks beyond the building proper and from it covered flights of stairs and elevators conduct traffic to the various train platforms below. In opposite manner, the incoming passengers are raised to the concourse and thence ascend to the main floor and exit on the street. Thus the difference in grade between the street and the tracks affords the solution of the problem of³ conducting traffic safely and without interruption across the tracks.

Contemporary newspaper descriptions make clear the special significance with which the general public would view the concourse:

From the center of the east facade runs a concourse 43 feet wide and 116 feet long, crossing the five tracks by which trains enter the passenger yards. This concourse is a veritable glass waiting room, from which waiting passengers may have a full view of all outgoing and incoming trains, as well as a comprehensive view of the city, and Mount Tacoma in the distance.⁴

At the grand opening celebration on May 1, 1911, the concourse was brilliantly lighted by its 39 incandescent ceiling lights, and was the scene of dancing until midnight to the music of the Tacoma theatre orchestra. In the years to come, the concourse served its intended function as the circulation link from major public areas on the upper floor to the train platforms below, as well as a light and cheery waiting area with a superb view of the trains, the waterway, and the mountains beyond.

An April 1911 edition of the Tacoma Daily Ledger provided a nearly complete picture of the concourse in its original form:

Concourse Will be Popular...

Between lines of terrazo pillars which sustain the floors of the main rotunda, outgoing passengers move directly to the open portion of the concourse which is the crystal room of the building. The lighted portion of the concourse is 103 feet long by 43 feet wide. The entire north, east and south exposures are of glass, giving a magnificent view of the incoming trains and a view of Mount Tacoma. The concourse is finished like the remainder of the public portions of the building, in marble, and furnished with window seats and other conveniences for the public. This will probably be one of the most popular rooms in the building on account of its exceptional lighting and cheery appearance, added to which is the panorama which the situation places before the occupants.

Two stairways and two passenger elevators lead from the concourse to the tracks below. Entrance to the elevators and stairways is had through ornamental iron gates on the south side of the concourse, which takes the passengers under the umbrella sheds of the yard. The elevators and stairways are so arranged that the incoming passengers will use one pair while the outgoing passengers will use the other, avoiding the usual rush experienced at train times.

...Long, wide steel and glass awnings cover the tracks in front of the baggage and express rooms so that all material may be handled direct to the trains without being damaged by rain.

...The five tracks which enter the yard run between umbrella sheds which are 20 feet wide and have a total of 2,576 lineal feet. The sheds are of steel, with corrugated tops, and are fireproof, furnishing excellent protection to the incoming and outgoing passengers between the cars and the entrance to the concourse.

An article published in Engineering News in July of 1912 further described the original platforms and tracks. A broad asphalt paved platform extended from the building to the first track. This platform was, and still remains, covered by a roof carried by trusses built into the wall and supported near the outer edge by columns kept 10 feet back from the edge of the platform. Two concrete island platforms were separated by a pair of tracks, and sheltered by butterfly type roofs that sloped down from the sides to a central drain. These roofs were supported by lattice cantilever trusses on center rows of columns spaced 20 feet apart. Each column was composed of a pair of channels set back to back about 1 1/8 inch apart.⁶ The concourse itself, which spanned

the tracks and platforms below, was carried by a bridge on concrete piers spaced at 22 foot intervals.

Plans in Burlington Northern, Inc., files indicate that the structural system of the concourse was redesigned in 1916. At this time, a steel truss support system was added.⁷ In most instances, the truss was tied to existing concrete piers. It extends well beyond the east elevation of the concourse, and is anchored to the ground carrying a series of utility cables.

The compelling rhythm of the vertical wood frames of the windows juxtaposed to the expanse of glass was disturbed by the insertion of office partitions along the entire length of the north side of the concourse. The exact date of construction of these partitions is not certain, but the materials, craftsmanship, and the style of the remodelling would suggest that this occurred prior to 1930. The offices impaired the original design of the concourse which was, in effect, an open passageway enclosed by walls of windows that permitted a panoramic view of the vast network of railroad tracks and their relationship to the city from north to south.

The concourse is architecturally and historically significant as part of Reed and Stem's original design of the Tacoma Union Passenger Station. It was built much as the architects' drawings depict. Authors of the day commented repeatedly on the value of the concourse as an auxiliary waiting room. It was a popular observation deck with panoramic views. The concourse solved, in a simple and efficient manner, the very real problem of moving passengers from Pacific Avenue level down to track level. For both embarking and debarking passengers, the concourse was an integral element in the traffic flow pattern. It was well designed for that purpose, and in conjunction with other spacial features of the building, helped to earn the Tacoma terminal a reputation for efficiency. Functionally, the concourse was a vital appendage of the station,

the final link in the formal sequence of spaces leading the passenger from the street to the train itself.

This report was based in large part on an earlier work by Florence K. Lentz, Archaeological and Historical Services, Eastern Washington University, February 8, 1982.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Tacoma Daily Ledger, April 30, 1911, p. 1.
- ² The Western Architect, p. 130.
- ³ Railroad Age Gazette, p. 365.
- ⁴ Tacoma Daily Ledger, April 30, 1911, p. 13.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 14. ⁶ Engineering News, pp. 103, 104.
- ⁷ Telephone report from Duane Matchett, DOT, on his contact with Burlington Northern records personnel in St. Paul, Minnesota, February 1, 1982.

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